

PUBLIC DISCOURSE,
MORAL EDUCATION, AND
REASONABLENESS

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John Dewey would be quite concerned about the shortcomings of public discourse on complex, deeply troubling social and political issues facing us today. Those seeking fair and thorough discussions of, say, environmental challenges, the distribution of wealth and political power, or the availability and quality of health care are commonly frustrated. All too often what they find are boldly assertive presentations accompanied with an impatient dismissal of those who dare to disagree. Such discourse exhibits serious failure to consider issues fully and fairly. Rather than laying out issues carefully and thoughtfully discussing differing perspectives on critical matters of public concern, it is a common practice simply to dismiss others by asserting that they are relying on “fake news”, unfounded “conspiracy theories”, or otherwise unreliable sources. The implication is that oppositional views fail to have enough credence to merit serious consideration. This is an atmosphere featuring *ad hominem*s, rather than serious discussion.

On such shortcomings, in his *Reconstruction of Philosophy*, Dewey offered advice as sound today as it was then:

Morals is not a catalogue of acts nor a set of rules to be applied like drugstore prescriptions or cook-book recipes. The need in morals is for specific methods of inquiry and contrivance: Methods of inquiry to locate difficulties and evils; methods of contrivance to form plans to be used as working hypotheses in dealing with them. And the pragmatic import of the logic of individualized situations, each having its own irreplaceable good and principle, is to transfer the attention of theory from preoccupation with general conceptions to the problem of developing effective methods of inquiry.

Dewey's view was that the task of developing and adopting effective methods of moral inquiry should not wait until we have become adults. Many educators seemingly agree that this is much too late and that the schools have a vital role to play.

Beginning in the last few decades of the 20th century, a variety of efforts were made to include morality in some form in K-12 educational settings. One such popular effort was made by advocates of “values clarification”. However, this program was strongly opposed by moral psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg and his many followers. They were concerned about its seemingly relativistic implications, due to its reluctance to encourage critical evaluation of values once they were clarified. In turn, although initially widely accepted, by the early 1980’s Kohlberg’s methodology was challenged by the claim that it arbitrarily privileged the voices of boys and adult males over those of girls and women. (First to suggest this was Kohlberg’s close colleague Carol Gilligan, author of *In a Different Voice*.)

Doubtless Dewey would have taken issue with Kohlberg’s dismissal of the importance of virtues and his attempt to show that affect plays a secondary role in moral development, with reason being given pride of place instead. A strong advocate of the development of virtues, Dewey described them in terms of habits. But *moral* habits, he maintained, essentially involve *reflection, imagination, and*

good judgment. This requires reason, but it engages affect as well.

It might be thought that Dewey would have welcomed the revival of programs on virtues and character education in the schools that have succeeded the “values clarification” approach. However, these popular programs, too, seem to fall short of what Dewey calls for. Broadly cast as their proposed lists of virtues are, none of them explicitly endorse a virtue that Dewey would recognize as fundamental: *reasonableness*.

Reasonableness is primarily a social disposition: the reasonable person respects others and is prepared to take seriously their views and their feelings, even to the extent of being willing to modify one’s own views in response to the critical assessment of others. One is, in other words, willing to be reasoned with.

This is a view espoused by participants in the philosophy for children movement initiated by philosopher Matthew Lipman in the late 1960’s. Concerned about the prevalence of unreasonable public discourse in that turbulent time, Lipman left his tenured position in

philosophy at Columbia University to found the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC) at Montclair State University. Lipman and his followers were convinced that promoting the philosophical thinking of children (K-12) could result in more children becoming adults who would call for radical improvements in the moral quality of public discourse.

Some years earlier, philosopher W.M. Sibley published a suggestive article on reasonableness as a moral virtue. In "The Rational Versus the Reasonable," (*Philosophical Review*, 62, 1953) he explicitly distinguishes 'reasonable' in its moral sense from the broader notion of 'rational'. Insofar as I am rational, says Sibley, I may be willing to consider all factors relevant to my circumstances, including likely consequences for others. But, he points out, taking into account how one's own interests might affect others does not necessarily include regarding the interests of others as important in their own right. This is required if one is 'reasonable' in its moral sense. He explains:

If I desire that my conduct shall be deemed *reasonable* by someone taking the standpoint of moral judgment,

I must exhibit something more than mere rationality or intelligence. To be reasonable here is to see the matter—as we commonly put it—from the other person’s point of view, to discover how each will be affected by the possible alternative actions; and, moreover, not merely to “see” this (for any merely prudent person would do as much) but also to be prepared to be disinterestedly *influenced*, in reaching a decision, by the estimate of these possible results. I must justify my conduct in terms of some principle capable of being appealed to by all parties concerned, some principle from which we can reason in common. (Sibley, 57.)

For Sibley, a morally reasonable person is responsive to the perspectives of others, which minimally requires working at understanding what those perspectives are, taking into account both significant differences from and similarities to one’s own.

Sibley’s account of reasonableness seems well suited for Dewey’s concern that we work on developing effective methods of moral inquiry in all educational endeavors in the

schools, whether we are talking about history, literature, science, or any other school subject. Many character education advocates favor setting aside a special time in the school day to focus exclusively on their list of moral virtues. However, rather than seeing morality as simply another, separable, school subject, we might with Dewey see it as an *aspect*, or *dimension*, of any standard subject area. Thus, the study of history could include reflecting on the moral dimensions of history—of laws, slavery, the treatment of women, the forcible removal of native peoples from their land, wars, and so on. The study of literature could include explicit attention to, and critical reflection on, moral themes running through poetry, short stories, and novels. The study of science could include the moral dimensions of scientific research, as well as environmental moral challenges. But, to satisfy Dewey, careful study of the moral dimensions of these standard subjects must emphasize the importance of promoting “effective methods of inquiry.”

However, helping children develop such methods of inquiry, at whatever educational level, requires respecting

their abilities as moral inquirers from the outset. This includes respecting their moral and philosophical interests and abilities. By the time children first enter school, they are already somewhat sophisticated moral inquirers, with strong ideas about what is fair and unfair, kind and cruel, honest and dishonest, and so on. But their ideas on such matters need to be much further developed, refined, and applied to kinds of contexts they have yet to encounter.

Kindergarten teacher Vivian Gussin Paley (1929-2019) was especially adept at promoting this sort of inquiry with young children. Recipient of the prestigious MacArthur Fellowship in 1989, Paley not only wrote and discussed (with children and adults) stories for children, she also wrote about her experiences as a teacher. Her *You Can't Say You Can't Play* (Harvard University Press, 1992) recounts discussions Paley had about fairness, respect, kindness, and rules with kindergarten through 5th grade children. These discussions all pivot around the question of whether there should be a rule about children playing together at school: "You Can't Say You Can't Play". Her inquiry was prompted by a problem she encountered as a teacher: What should be

done about the harms suffered by children in her classrooms who are excluded from joining others in play—that is, children who see themselves as rejected?

Paley discussed the suggested rule with her kindergarten class for several months before trying it out with them. But even then the problems the rule addresses were not completely resolved. She also discussed it with older children and learned even more about both why having such a rule poses serious problems and why it might be important to keep trying.

She concluded that it is important to try because of what is at stake, and because of the power discussing such a rule has to stimulate thoughtful discussion of the wider issues it raises. As Paley put it, “You Can’t Say You Can’t Play” is a different kind of rule than those forbidding hitting or the destruction of property. These rules are viewed as basically necessary and uncontroversial. Her suggested rule, however, goes against practices that are widely viewed as a normal part of social life. We choose to do things with our friends that exclude others. Groups of children gather to play with each other; others are left out. These groups may

operate with a “boss rule,” which involves one or two children deciding for the group who will or will not be allowed to join.

However, Paley asked, what do these exclusionary practices do to those who are excluded? How do they feel? When she invited students to discuss these questions, she was barraged with stories of the disappointment and pain of being rejected. Virtually all the children, regardless of grade level, had vivid, detailed experiences to relate—experiences in their classrooms and school recess activities.

Paley then asked two questions about the rule “You Can’t Say You Can’t Play”. First, is it *fair*? Second, will it *work*? An interesting, and important, feature of Paley’s exploration of these questions with the children is that she says she was as uncertain about what the best answers are as the children were. Although most agreed that the rule is fair, they also had serious concerns about moral costs that might come with the rule. After all, they noted, friendship is limited, and shouldn’t friends sometimes be allowed to be together without including others? What if someone who insists on being included ruins the play by being

uncooperative or disruptive? And what about *forcing* people to play with those they don't want to play with? These questions, and many others, were raised and carefully discussed by the children, kindergarten through fifth grade.

Paley respected the ability of even kindergartners to reflect on the rules governing their lives in school. Thus, she embarked on what was essentially a practical philosophical journey with her students. Furthermore, this journey was as much hers as the children's. Paley's exemplary work illustrates the promise of a *shared* search undertaken by teachers and students together.

So, although there can be agreement that trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship constitute basic virtues that warrant support and careful attention in the schools, Vivian Paley's efforts can serve as a model of inquiry that allows reasonableness to be prominent in the education of children as they reflect on moral problems they are facing now, and this encourages them to continue to do so as they encounter new kinds of problems as their future unfolds. Dewey would approve.

The idea of an integral and trans-disciplinary approach discussed here has been inspired by my conversation with Tomohiro Akiyama. I thank for his suggestions.